

Over the years since the end of the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, much has been written about the role of the Swedish Missionary, Otto Witt, the incumbent at Rorke's Drift Mission at the time of the Zulu attack there on the 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1879. As the years accelerate us away from the time when this dramatic event excited men around the world, less is certain about this previously unknown Swedish missionary than was previously thought. The Society's journals have followed the various accounts of him and, where applicable, reproduced new information as it has come to light. As a result of our most recent research, which led to the discovery of the August Hammar letters in Sweden (Journal 26), I tend even more to believe that Witt was a bit of a scoundrel who had made up a fanciful account *en route* to London, probably having neither seen what he claimed nor been present when the Zulus attacked. I have long suspected that Witt's motive behind his account was to gain fame for a series of profitable lectures during his stay in England and to extract excessive compensation (£600) from the British government for damage to his two buildings. On the basis that I like to let the evidence take me where it will, I re-open the subject again to see what is new.

In the Society Journal 26 (June 2009) I published the recently discovered letters written from Rorke's Drift by the young Swedish friend of Otto Witt, August Hammar, and the 1936 translations into English by Hammar's descendents. These illuminating letters were written by a twenty-year-old family friend of the Witts visiting Rorke's Drift, who later became the first ever explorer to survey the Victoria Falls and who went on to become one of South Africa's most senior and respected government surveyors; these letters counter the curious chronology of Witt's ILN account of the battle - leaving me doubting Witt's truthfulness. In April this year I travelled to Rorke's Drift with Dr David Payne (author of the Harford book) with the intention of verifying both Witt's and Hammar's accounts by visiting the locations from which they claimed to have observed events. Our observations form part of this article.

Witt's personal history is reasonably well documented except for the vital period surrounding the 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1879; less well known is how his contemporaries and historians viewed him. Here is an (unabridged) sample;

***The Times (Natal)*** reporter 23rd April 1879 – '*A short visit to Rorke's Drift*'.

The fort commands the pons and drift, and in the distance, eight miles away, the Isandhlwana height shows in bold relief, a constant reminder of the heart-sickening disaster. Amongst my rambles, I climbed to the top of the Ascarberg (Oskarsberg) 680 feet above Rorke's Drift, and had an opportunity of examining the country over which the Zulu passes from Isandhlwana to Rorke's Drift. The wagons are still scattered about the former place as they were left on the 22<sup>nd</sup> January last. I took with me the description given by that first class imposter and romancer Mr. De Witt to the home papers. He states that the distance between the two places is three miles, and that he could see the place where the camp was pitched, and that he saw the battle and heard the firing from the rifles. The fact that from the highest point of the Ascarberg to Isandhlwana is in a bee line not less than seven miles, that no part of the camping ground is visible, and that he could not have seen the firing, all for the reasons that the hill and ridge hide the camp and battle field. As for his having heard musketry fire at that distance; well, all I can say is, it speaks for the length of his ears. Verb.sap. I fancy he will get a very hearty reception should he ever return to the colony.

**Canon Lummis M.C.** who wrote the most insightful biography of Padre George Smith, *Padre George Smith of Rorke's Drift*, referred to Witt as follow, "We may consider the picture of him (in the film *Zulu*) as a dipsomaniac unrealistic; but he was certainly no hero. In fact he reached Durban eventually and gave a very untruthful and garbled account to English newspapers. He was most unpopular in Zululand. Cetewayo had forbidden him entrance into his territory. With the colonists in Natal he was even more unpopular".

**Donald Morris** wrote of Witt in *The Washing of the Spears*,

His wife and three children had left several days earlier in a wagon with a single native retainer to make their way to friends in Durban, and they were, he knew, at the Umsinga Mission Station. In his excited imagination, nothing stood between them and a bloodthirsty Zulu impi but the Buffalo River and a few miles of open country. Abandoning the last claim to his homestead on the spot, he turned and fled up the track to Helpmakaar to find his family.

He also added, “Witt was never popular in Natal”. To be fair to Morris, when writing this he knew nothing of the Hammar letters and naturally relied on a cross-selection of accounts, including Witt’s, when putting his synopsis together.

**Frank Emery**, the Oxford University lecturer and author of *The Red Soldier* wrote of Witt, The Victorians... were exploited by Otto Witt, the missionary whose home at Rorke’s Drift was the scene of the battle there on 22 January, and who brazenly lectured through England with a false tale of his own experiences.

**James Bancroft’s** *Rorke’s Drift* acknowledges that Pte Wall is credited by some authors, including Donald Morris, as having accompanied Witt and Dr Reynolds to the top of the Oscarsberg and even for shouting the much publicised warning, “Here they come, black as hell and as thick as grass”. But Bancroft astutely comments, neither Rev. Smith nor Rev. Witt mention either Wall or the shouted warning in their accounts and he did not return with Dr. Reynolds, if he ever did go up the Oskarberg (sic) to begin with.

Bancroft adds, quoting Trooper Lugg,

A man called Hall of the RMB rode out to see if he could see anything of them (Zulus) and on going out about 1,000 yards, he could see them just a mile off, as he described it ‘as black as hell and as thick as grass’, and recorded his memory soon after the event. In a letter to the *Natal Witness* Hall confirmed that he was asked to assess what was happening and galloped back to the house and told Lugg “the Zulus are upon us”.

So, Hall or Wall? The deeper one researches, the muddier the water becomes. The most noted modern author on the subject of the Anglo-Zulu War, Ian Knight, whose recent highly acclaimed *Zulu Rising* gives us greater insight into this war, is nevertheless circumspect about the role of Witt and teasingly leaves a number of interesting aspects of Witt’s account ‘in the air’. Ian confirms that Witt had been widely ridiculed and rightly states that “it is perfectly possible that the party witnessed the final stage of the battle, which took place in the valley of the Manzimnama (stream), which is clearly visible from the summit of Shiyane (Oscarsberg)”. Ian qualifies his position by stating “Witt’s account was published in a number of UK papers, notably the ILN, 8<sup>th</sup> March 1879”. In order to try and verify what Witt claimed, I hereby reproduce Witt’s ILN and UK press account *verbatim*. Where, to my mind, there is ambiguity I have broken into the account with reference numerals so that the reader can consider material that challenges or counters Witt. Thus, readers can draw their own conclusions as to the veracity of Witt’s account – and even ponder whether he observed the battle at Isandlwana and/or his public claim to have been present at Rorke’s Drift when the Zulus attacked.

**Witt’s *Illustrated London News* 8<sup>th</sup> March 1879 account** (as widely reported in the British press).

“It was on January 22<sup>nd</sup> 1879. Bright and warm rose the sun over my station, Oscarsburg(1) situated at the Buffalo River, on the Natal side. At the farm is a drift into the Zulu country, known by the name of Rorke’s Drift. Ten minutes walk from the drift where my houses, two large buildings, situate at the border of the Zulus’ country, and at the very place where the greatest resistance from the Zulus was expected. Those buildings were found very fit indeed for military purposes, and at the request of the general commanding the forces I left them at his disposal. A large outhouse, eighty foot by twenty foot, which I used as a church, was turned into a commissariat store, and my dwelling house, sixty foot by eighteen foot was made an hospital, in consequence of which I had to send away my wife and three children. I myself stayed and acted

as interpreter between the doctor in charge and the black people. Before the above mentioned day all was quiet, waggons arriving constantly augmenting the store of provisions, and the only variation in this monotony was the reports of skirmishes taking place on this side of the river (2) – but heavy storm is often preceded by sudden calm.

The 22<sup>nd</sup> came and witnessed the battle, in which the warriors on both sides showed, or perhaps were compelled to show, a courage that can be denied neither by contemporaries nor by posterity. Behold on the one side one thousand soldiers reinforced by equal their number by black ones, leaving their camp to attack an army more than ten times their number! Behold, on the other side this mass of Zulus, who, close together, walk straight against the mouth of the cannon! (3) Look how thousands after thousands are killed, and nevertheless the mass prevails, without fear, over the dead bodies of their comrades against the destroying weapon! Behold on the other side a few dozen white troops, the only remainder of the thousand: look how they, after having shot away all their ammunition, keep close together, trying yet awhile, to fight for their lives with the bayonet. Behold, on the other side – the black ones – how they are fighting against the intruder and oppressor, fighting for liberty and independence, coming close to the bayonets and making them harmless by taking the corpses of their brethren and throwing them on them! Who wins your warmest sympathy – the captain, who, knowing that he is lost, stops a moment to spike the cannon and die (4); or the Zulu, who, in his excitement, leaves his fellow soldiers behind, and alone makes the attack on the hospital at Rorke's Drift, resting his gun on the very barricade, and firing on those inside? (5) Is your admiration greater for those ninety five who entered the commissariat store at Oskarsburg and defended it against five thousand Zulus than for those five thousand who fought outside the whole night, trying to overpower the whites, and who withdrew at daybreak, leaving one thousand dead, hundreds of whom were lying even on the very veranda of the house? (6) Indeed, your admiration ought to be as great for the one as for the other. Where did you find greater courage or contempt of death than theirs?

Dr R and myself had in the morning made up our minds to pay a visit to a missionary in the neighbourhood.(7) When about to start at noon we were told that a great fight was taking place over the river. In company with the chaplain of the forces (8) we ascended a hill 500 feet high, between the station and the river, from which we had an excellent view of what was going on. At a distance of three miles (9) as the crow flies, we saw the place where the camp was made. The whole spot was filled with black figures swarming about. Down below us, though very hilly and broken, there was a large flat between us and the camp, and on this line we saw three lines drawn, the one end reaching the camp and the other the river. The whole of it was a shocking sight. The heavy firing from the rifles mixed with the rolling sound of the big guns and the movements of the lines, all this caused a nervous feeling that something terrifying was going on.

My position was on a hill on the other side of the river from where the fight was raging. I watched the Zulus descend and draw themselves in long lines between the camp and the river. From where I stood I could also see the English forces advancing to the attack; (10) but I could not see any hand-to-hand fighting. I observed that the Zulus were fighting heavily, and presently I saw that the English were surrounded in a Kraal some little distance from the camp. (11) What I was wroth to learn was the reason why the British troops left their camp to attack, instead of remaining on the defensive. In my opinion, they should never have thus advanced. As the fight progressed, and I saw that the English were being beaten, I prepared to fly, and had my horse saddled with that object in view. At length I noticed that the Zulus were crossing the river. It was not very deep. The water only reached up to their waists as they forded the stream. I saw that there was no time to be lost, and I dashed away on horseback as hard as I could go, chased by the Zulus, who did their best to catch me, but failed. (12) So far as I have been able I have described the fighting which took place correctly. I could just discern that the Zulus were hurling the bodies of their comrades upon the bayonets of the English as they fought and endeavoured to defend themselves in the kraal, but that was all. The distance I stood from the fight prevented my observing events more closely.

What struck us in the beginning was that a good many of the officers of the native contingent had one by one crossed the river some miles below the mission station, and came galloping towards it as fast as the horses could carry them; and, on the left hand side, we noticed some of the mounted natives crossing at the drift, and driving some cattle before them. (13) Although we

could not clearly comprehend this movement, we did not pay much attention to it, our minds being far from dreaming of the real facts. In the meantime the three lines had drawn themselves more close together to one spot. Here was a large kaffir kraal, which was gradually surrounded and fired at. How many men had entered it I do not know, and shall probably never learn, because what was inside there was certainly killed by Zulu bullets. After twenty minutes heavy firing the resistance ceased, and the attacking ones divided themselves again. Half of them returned towards the camp, the other half, from 5000 to 6000, approaching the river, and the place where I was. Firing every now and then, they reached at last the river. There another skirmish took place. The spot where they crossed was half a mile below the drift, and defended by a few Natal kaffirs. A tolerably good force could easily have prevented their crossing. Having killed these few Natal kaffirs, they crossed one by one. (14) This done, they sat down for half an hour in order to get some rest, and to strengthen themselves from the snuff box. Then they separated again, divided into two parties, the one following the course of the river, the other taking its way towards us. We now perceived that the house of a neighbouring farm on the Natal side was on fire; but we were so far from fancying that the Zulus would cross the river that we never had the slightest idea of the real state of things, but were still thinking that the approaching black people were our own troops. They now were so close to us that their bullets could easily have reached us, and we saw that they were all naked. Reality, then, also stood naked for us. The thick mass that swarmed in the camp was the Zulus who had taken possession of it. The light lines firing at the kraal were Zulus, and, finally, those who had crossed the river and were approaching were Zulus. The few whites whom we had seen galloping now and then to the Natal side, perhaps, were the only surviving of all those who a week before had entered the Zulu country. Our eyes were opened, but why had they not been before? How had the idea of the possibility of a disaster on our side been so far from us that the clearest facts had been unable to make it enter our minds? The officers' flight, the burning farm, the immense masses (say 20,000) moving to and fro in light lines, why had not this long ago told us that the Lord's thoughts are not our thoughts nor our ways his? These ideas were crossing my mind while we speedily descended the hill, followed by the Zulus.

Arrived at the houses, we saw at once a new proof of the sad truth to which our eyes had just been opened. The tents which surrounded the house, (15) and were used by a company left there under Major Spalding for the protection of the hospital and the commissariat stores, had been pulled down and a temporary barricade of meal sacks was made between the houses, which were a distance of twenty yards from one another. Here we were met by anxious questions from many lips, 'do the Zulus come here?' – and compelled to answer 'in five minutes they will be here'.

In the same moment the fighting began in the neighbourhood. Though wishing to take part in the defence of my own house, and at the same time in the defence of an important place for the whole colony, yet my thoughts went to my wife and to my children, who were at a short distance from there, and did not know anything of what was going on. Having seen one part of the Zulus going in that direction I followed the desire of my heart, saddled my horse, and started to warn my family. But my poor family had much to suffer before, in five days journey to Maritzberg, chased by the Zulus, (16) and frightened by all sorts of reports. I will pass over this as of no interest to other people. The attack on Oskarsburg had been awful.

Before I started I saw a Zulu alone at the barricade, kneeling and firing. (17) The whole force drew nearer, and the battle drew on heavier. Soon the hospital was on fire. Our people found it impossible to defend themselves inside the barricade. They must retire within the walls, thus entering the commissariat store. The six people were brought here, except five who could not be removed, and who were stabbed by the Zulus and burnt. (18) That the hospital was set on fire was certainly a great personal loss for me, as all my property was burnt; but it was of great importance for the whole colony, and especially for the people in the commissariat stores, as the flames of the burning house enabled them to aim properly on the Zulus and thus keep them at a fair distance. If the Zulus had known what they ought they should never have put fire to the house, and the heavy darkness of that dreadful night would have made our troops unable to defend themselves as they did".

References;

1. Witt mis-spells Oscarsberg (Oscarhill) as 'Oscarsburg' (Oscarstown).
2. This is not mentioned elsewhere.
3. Not visible from the Oscarsberg.
4. The guns were not spiked.
5. By Witt's own admission he had departed Rorke's Drift before the Zulus arrived.
6. Ditto.
7. Witt is not mentioned by Dr Reynolds.
8. Witt is not mentioned by Rev. Smith.
9. Isandlwana from the summit of the Oscarsberg is just over eight miles according to the 1:500,000 S. Africa survey quoted in Ian Knight's *Then and Now*.
10. Not visible from the Oscarsberg.
11. Not mentioned elsewhere and no known action took place in an unidentified kraal.
12. At best, a figment of his imagination.
13. Unlikely that fleeing riders would drive cattle before them. While still at Rorke's Drift, Witt would have regularly seen riders from routine patrols bringing back Zulu cattle which were then sold to the military quartermasters.  
This unknown action appears to be Witt's previously mentioned, and unidentified, Zulu kraal. See (11) above.
14. Raw's men collected themselves on the Natal bank at Fugitives' Drift and gave other survivors covering fire – but none was killed by the Zulus. Witt could have subsequently heard of this from one of these survivors who, like Witt, made their way back into Natal.
15. It is well documented that B Company's tents were all together some sixty yards to the East of Witt's house.
16. They were not chased by any Zulus.
17. Not mentioned by anyone else.
18. This was only clarified the following morning.

As most historians and authors have readily identified, Witt's account is confused and unreliable at best or, at worst, fake.

The discovery of the two Hammar letters, reproduced in Journal 26, are brief but naively honest. Hammar details Witt's intended departure to follow his family as early as 1 January. His diary entry states;

New Year's Day. The situation is getting critical, all the white people have left, tonight if shots are heard Elin and the children and other women will leave by ox wagon for safety. Otto follows so then I will be alone for a few days on the station until Otto returns.

Oskarsberg 6 January 1879:

...I am with the Witts.

...British officers call today... they want the house and store and tell Rev Witt to leave. We are very worried about events... we have put rocks round the outside of the house. Mr Witt and I are the only people left, and he prepares to follow his family tomorrow to safety. I will care after the property.

...many troops arrive over three days and Otto has left very angry at the damage to his house. There is no more space for tents between the house and the river, it is full of troops, artillery and horses...and much noise. There are troop tents next to the Witt's store and the troops cook next to the house... I get nothing from them ... Otto left me some food.

...I sleep outside under an oilcloth as troops have smashed the Witt house doors for firewood and prepared the house and store if the Zulu attack... British troops believe the Zulu will attack the river crossing soon... the house is now a British hospital and will be busy if things go bad...no sign of the Zulu army but everybody is ready.

...Otto Witt will return when his family are safe.

...I am well and I will write again soon.

Hammar is precise.... 'Otto has left very angry at the damage to his house', 'Otto left me some food', and, 'Otto Witt will return when his family are safe'. (underlinings are mine – Ed.)

Curiously Witt did not mention Hammar in any of his accounts. There is no mention in the Hammar family documents that Witt and Hammar ever met again.

In 1985 Mr C.J. Fourie of the Natal Library and Museum Service organised an exhibition of August Hammar's oil paintings depicting scenes of South Africa's landscapes. In the glossy Exhibition prospectus he described Hammar thus;

He landed at Durban and made his way to the mission station at Rorke's Drift. On his way he witnessed various incidents in the progress of the Zulu war. Engravings based on two sketches he made – British forces crossing the Buffalo River and Chelmsford's forces burning Sirayo's Kraal – appeared in *The Graphic* in London. He had observed the activity of the battle of Isandlwana at a distance of five to six miles. Returning to the mission he was cut off by a Zulu impi and spent the night in the hills watching the epic resistance at Rorke's Drift. Thus, Hammar on arrival in Natal, was unexpectedly connected with major events in history.

My conjecture is simple; by the time the British physically took over the mission station Witt had already left Rorke's Drift leaving Hammar behind to protect his interests. Hammar tells us that Witt had been ordered to leave by the British – so why would Witt have remained, especially if he was worried about his family? The in-coming British troops found the mission being looked after by a Swede who spoke no English – and the English spoke no Swedish. Could the British have presumed Hammar was Witt and, if so, was it Hammar who went to the summit of the Oscarsberg. After all, his estimate of seeing the battle five to six miles away is almost accurate. Hammar's account rings true as he had no motive for making a false account and, indeed, never once promoted his connection with Rorke's Drift. Furthermore, the Oscarsberg was the most likely spot for him to have witnessed fighting at both Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift mentioned in his letters home. With trouble clearly looming, he then set off on foot towards the Helpmakaar plateau from which, again, when he looked back, he would have had an excellent view of events back at Rorke's Drift. We know, post battle, he walked back to Durban and then joined Baker's Horse, mainly because he was without funds and hungry.

Finally, if Witt had seen what he claimed, why did he not tell the truth? This was certainly a case where the facts were far more exciting and punchy than the garbled version promoted by Witt – all of which Witt could have overheard from genuine survivors while on his journey back to Durban.

So, until it can be proved otherwise, I stand by my conjecture that the recently arrived British at Rorke's Drift believed Hammar was Witt, and that Witt was long gone before the battle even started.

Otto Witt might have had the last laugh. Following hostilities, he returned to rebuild the Rorke's Drift mission station before he retired home to Sweden in 1891. Meanwhile, on the 4<sup>th</sup> February 1884 Witt received notification from the Acting Assistant Colonial Secretary that his application for damages from the British Government had finally been settled in his favour. Witt replied as follows;

Sir,

I beg to inform you that I am in receipt of your letter of Feb.4<sup>th</sup> stating that the Lord Commissioner's of Her Majesty's Treasury have been pleased to sanction the payment of the sum of £450 on account of the damage done during the Zulu War to the Swedish Mission House at Rorke's Drift, and the sum of £200 to me personally.

Further I beg to state that I will accept the above named amount viz £450 and £200 in full satisfaction of all demands in connection with these claims, as well from the side of the Mission Society as from my own side.

Please be good enough to inform me what I have to do in order to get possession of the money.

Otto Witt.

nb. The letter is to be found in the KwaZulu Natal Archives. Whether the money was ever paid has never been ascertained.

View from the top of the Oscarsberg towards Isandlwana (2010)



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Stafford House nurses in the Anglo-Zulu War. Nurse Mary Armfield RRC.

The following query came from an Australian researcher , but sadly I was not able to offer any further information apart from supplying the addresses of the various reference facilities. However, I thought the gist of the query was of interest. Adrian Greaves

It was disappointing to hear that your research doesn't extend to Mary Armfield. I've just seen a copy of your book (Sister Janet) and it does give me some good background about the Stafford House nurses and why they were sent. I'm not sure where to turn next to try and find out about Mary. I have found out some fascinating information about her husband, who was an Australian gold prospector, employed by the Transvaal government in 1879 to report on the prospects for finding gold in South Africa. Before he had time to report, he died from blackwater fever, in February 1879. Just a few months later his widow was on her way to South Africa with the Stafford House nurses. I can only think that perhaps she wanted to try and find his grave. She ended up marrying again, a Captain J R Lumley, who served with the Lonsdale Horse in the Zulu War. She remained in London for the rest of her life. Would I find anything in early hospital records or newsletters? Were there many training hospitals in London at that time? I'm wondering if any of your colleagues would also know where else I could look.